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ABSTRACT

Approximately 15% (7.6 million) of the estimated 50.6 million U.S. citizens who browse the World Wide Web are aged 50 or older, and 30% of adults aged 55-75 own a computer. Although many older adults initially log on to the Internet as a means of connecting with friends and family, they quickly learn that it is also a valuable source of information on financial, health, travel, and other topics of interest to them. Among older adults, both computer ownership and online participation are tied to level of education and to socioeconomic status. When combined with Internet access, learning to use computer technology can provide older adults opportunities for lifelong learning and continuing growth and development. It can also help offset social isolation and loneliness. It has been recommended that peer instructors who understand how adults learn and teaching methodologies that are nonthreatening and self-paced be used to teach older adults to use computer technology. Adult and continuing educators must be aware of issues of access and equity and design training programs that will attract groups of older adults who are not currently accessing the Internet. Contains an annotated bibliography of 20 print and Web-based resources.) (MN)

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Seniors in Cyberspace
Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

by Susan Imel 1998

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Seniors in Cyberspace

Many older adults are defying the stereotype that computers are for the young and are actively engaged in using the Internet as both consumers and producers of information (Imel 1997). Approximately 15% (7.6 million) of the estimated 50.6 million U.S. citizens who browse the web are aged 50 and older (Lewis 1998), and 30% of older adults aged 55-75 own a computer (Adler 1996). These figures represent the intersection of two trends: the aging of the population in the United States with an extended period of active adulthood and the growth of the information society with unparalleled opportunities for connecting online (Furlong 1997; Timmerman 1998). This **Alert** highlights some of the trends and issues related to the increased use of the Internet by older adults, including some implications for adult and continuing educators. Lists of print and online resources are included.

A desire to gain access to cyberspace is one of the primary reasons older adults adopt new information technologies (Furlong 1997). Although many older adults initially log on to the Internet as a means of connecting with friends and family, they quickly learn that it is also a valuable source of information on financial, health, travel and other topics of interest to them. In addition, through discussion groups and "chat rooms," they link with individuals who share similar interests (Flynn 1996; Furlong 1997; Lewis 1998). The Internet also erases the impact of many physical disabilities (Furlong 1997; LeClaire 1997). According to Hugh O'Connor, director of the AARP Research Information Center, "the Internet can stimulate independent living among the elderly . . . . help combat isolation, spur lifelong learning, create opportunities for volunteering and make it easier for retirees to earn extra income without leaving home" (Lewis 1998, pp. 1, 14).

Among older adults, both computer ownership and online participation are tied to level of education and to socioeconomic status: 50% of those over age 50 who use the Internet have college degrees and almost one-third have incomes exceeding $70,000. Older women, however, are less likely than their male counterparts to own computers and to go online (Adler 1996; Timmerman 1998).

Older adults have used a variety of methods to learn how to use the computer. Nearly 40% taught themselves, whereas just over 20% learned at work. Women are much more likely than men to have taken a class or learned from a friend. Those who consider themselves to be novice computer users are much more likely to have taken a class than those who consider themselves to be experienced. "Experienced" users tend to be those who have taught themselves or learned at work (Adler 1996). Timmerman (1998) speculates that older adults who were early adopters of computer technology and, as a result, consider themselves experienced, are likely to be self-directed, lifelong learners; thus teaching themselves is a preferred method of learning.

When combined with Internet access, learning to use computer technology can provide older adults opportunities for lifelong learning and continuing growth and development and also help offset social isolation and loneliness (Furlong 1997; Galusha [1997]). Adult and continuing educators who wish to support older adult learners in learning to use computer technology should consider the following. Although a strong demand for computer instruction exists among older adults, facilities and equipment on which to provide training are often lacking (Galusha [1997]; Timmerman 1998). Some providers have overcome this barrier by entering into agreements with hardware and software manufacturers who agree to contribute equipment for training purposes (Timmerman 1998). Course development is another area that must be considered. Timmerman recommends the use of peer instructors who understand how adults learn and teaching methodologies that are nonthreatening and self-paced. Finally, adult and continuing educators need to be aware of issues of access and equity. The statistics on which older adults currently access the Internet closely mirror participation statistics for adult and continuing education. Adult and continuing education programs have tended to attract the most highly educated and affluent groups in the population. Adult educators need to develop training programs that will encourage groups of older adults who are not currently accessing the Internet to become full participants in the information age (ibid.).

Print Resources

Adler R. P. "Older Adults and Computers: Report of a National Survey." San Francisco, CA: SeniorNet, 1996. <http://www.seniornet.org/intute/survey2.html>

A survey was conducted by SeniorNet to assess attitudes and computer usage patterns among senior computer owners and to explore the level of familiarity with and interest in computers among nonowners. Survey results reveal that more and more older adults are becoming computer users.

Baldi, R. A. "Training Older Adults to Use the Computer: Issues Related to the Workplace, Attitudes, and Training." *Educational Gerontology* 23, no. 5 (July-August 1997): 453-465

After reviewing research that refutes negative perspectives about older adults' willingness and ability to acquire computer literacy, this article examines issues related to training older adults in the use of computers. Training to facilitate learning of computer skills by older adults should consider factors related to equipment, information, tasks, and individuals.

Callum, M. "Taming Your Computer." *New Choices: Living Even Better after 50* 36, no. 9 (November 1996): 68-73.

Discusses how older adults can use the new computer technology, including e-mail and CD-ROM, to uncover new worlds of interest and new communities of friends. Ten World Wide Web sites are highlighted.

Dixon, J. M. *Predicting Seniors' Use of Cyberspace*. New York: Garland, 1997.

Reports on a study of adults aged 55 and over who use SeniorNet. The study was designed to examine whether a needs gratification model could explain participants' social networking behaviors and to explain the frequency of their participation

Finn, J., ed. "Aging and Information Technology. Special Issue." *Generations* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 4-70

The focus of this issue is on how computers and the Internet are changing the delivery of services and care not only for older people but also for their families and professionals in the field of aging. Topics include health, spirituality, community building, confidentiality and security, distance learning in gerontology, and Internet resources on aging.

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Flynn-M. K. "Plugged in Seniors." ***U.S. News and World Report***, June 10, 1996. <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/snet.htm>

Describes how older people are using the Internet. Includes information on SeniorNet and lists some popular Internet sites for older adults.

Furlong, M. "Creating Online Community for Older Adults." ***Generations*** 21, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 33-35.

Discusses the role of learning communities in the changing world of information and highlights some "virtual places" that can provide older adults with services that can enhance their lives. Notes that gaining access to the Internet is one important reason that older adults use computers.

Galusha, J. M. "The Use of Computer Technology by Older Adults." Unpublished paper. Hattiesburg: University of Southern Mississippi, [1997].

This literature review explores the characteristics of older adults who use personal computers. Included is information on ownership, use, reasons for nonownership, challenges, and the author's perspective on training older adults to use the computer.

Imel, S. ***A New Look at Older Adults. Trends and Issues Alerts***. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, The Ohio State University, 1997. (ED 409 444). <http://coe.ohio-state.edu/cete/ericacve/docs/lookold.htm>

Three trends related to older adults are described: the amount and kind of learning in which they engage, advocacy of age-integrated programs and policies, and the amount of information about and for older adults available over the Internet. A bibliography of print resources and resource organizations is included.

Lawhon, T., Ennis, D., and Lawhon, D. C. "Senior Adults and Computers in the 1990s." ***Educational Gerontology*** 22, no. 2 (March 1996): 193-201.

Older adults can use computers to improve their productivity, entertain themselves, and enhance education and daily functions. Computer training helps them increase productivity, learn skills, and boost short-term memory. Electronic mail, online services, and the Internet encourage socialization. Adapted technology helps disabled and ill elders use computers.

LeClaire, R. B. "How a Computer and SeniorNet Changed My Life." ***Generations*** 21, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 36-37.

The author describes how her computer and membership in SeniorNet, an organization of older people using computers, changed her life. LeClaire, who is deaf, made many friends in this organization and was comforted by them during difficult times.

Lewis, R. "The Web: A New World Opens Up." ***AARP Bulletin*** 39, no. 2 (February 1998): 1, 14.

Discusses the variety of ways of older adults are using the Internet and examines its potential to "transform the experience of aging." A list of websites for federal government agencies, general information, and health and research material is included.

Redding, T. R.; Eisenman, G.; and Rugelo, J. "Training in Technology for Late Adopters: Learning in Retirement, Computers for Seniors." Unpublished paper, March 1998.

This paper presents a curriculum designed to teach computer technology through the Learning in Retirement Institute (LRI), a national program of peer-led continuing education programs for adults of retirement age. The authors suggest ways of removing learning barriers and improving the success rate for teaching technology to late adopters, those who want to learn about and use computers but who ultimately adjust to the change and who are most likely to participate in LRI programs.

Timmerman, S. "The Role of Information Technology in Older Adult Learning." In ***Learning: Meeting the Challenges of Older Adulthood. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education***, no. 77, edited by J. C. Fisher and M. A. Wolf. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Discusses how older adult learners are using information technology and describes SeniorNet's Learning Centers and Microsoft/AARP Community Technology Seminars. Future trends and issues highlighted include the failure of large numbers of older adults to engage in traditional distance learning, the production costs associated with the development of online and multimedia courses, and access of older adults with disabilities.

Internet Resources

American Association of Retired Persons <http://www.aarp.org>. Contains background on aging issues, reports on membership benefits, provides information about volunteer opportunities and local activities as well as links to other sites of interest to older adults.

Senior World Online <http://www.seniorworld.com/>. This online publication is organized by geographic region, with each regional area containing stories of regional as well as national interest.

Seniors Computer Information Project <http://www.mbnet.mb.ca/crm/>. A project of Creative Retirement Manitoba, this site features content in four main areas: specific categories (advocacy, health, lifestyle, finance, special needs, etc.), Café (discussion groups, Cyberpals, etc.), Canadian Geographic, and selected sites of interest.

SeniorNet <http://www.Seniornet.org/>. Includes Internet roundtables, e-mail pen pals, and information on Internet learning centers for seniors.

Seniors Online Blacksburg, VA <http://www.bev.net/community/seniors/>. In addition to full-text information related to local events, this site has sections on Internet help information sites, senior related sites on the web, and government, Internet, and financial resources for seniors.

Toledo-Lucas County Public Library Links for Older Adults <http://www.library.toledo.oh.us/adultlinks.htm#computers>. Provides links in the following areas: aging, computers, finance, genealogy, health, and travel.

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